

P. Sian, Sally Aw

P. Fields, Sidney

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Standard

Singapore Morning Daily

Singapore Afternoon Daily

ONLY HUMAN

Heads Publishing Empire

By SIDNEY FIELDS

Sally Aw Sian, the only lady publisher in Hong Kong, is the first woman in the 20-year history of the International Press Institute to be elected its president.

The IPI has a membership of 1,800 editors and publishers from 60 countries who jealously guard the freedom of the press, try to see to it that the free flow of news is not interrupted by governments or anyone else and that newsmen are protected from censorship and oppression.

"We do a few other things," Miss Sian said during a recent visit here. "The Institute carries on a training program for newsmen in Kenya. We pay for that. And we run another one in Nigeria with a grant from the Ford Foundation."

Plump, pleasant and proficient, Miss Sian's news empire consists of two bimonthly magazines, the English language Hong Kong Standard and two Chinese papers, the Sing Tao Jih Pao (the Singapore Morning Daily), and the Sing Tao Wan Pao (The Singapore Afternoon Daily). Her Chinese papers have a combined circulation of 220,000, largest on the island.

The type for them is hand set, but the pages are photographed, flown to Taipei, the Philippines, San Francisco and New York and printed on off-set presses.

"It's two days late," Miss Sian admitted, "but that doesn't really matter. In the past five years there's been a big influx of Hong Kong Chinese into the States and they're hungry for news from back home and Southeast Asia and the mainland."

Her father who owned three pharmaceutical houses in Hong Kong made his fortune with one cure-all ointment, something like mentholatum, called Tiger Balm. Every Hong Kong resident and tourist sooner or later says, "Let's go to the Tiger Balm Gardens." They're the big lovely parks filled with fine sculpture founded by her father and always free to the public. He also founded a chain of newspapers in Singapore, Bangkok, Malayasia and on mainland China before Mao took over in 1949.

Miss Sian's brother, piloting the family plane to check on the paper in Malayasia, crashed and was killed. He was 32 and the heir apparent. After the grief subsided her father asked his daughter: "Why not try the papers?"

She worked in every department, accounting, purchasing, circulation, advertising, editorial, starting at the bottom. Two years after she started her intensive apprenticeship her father died. A cousin took over the pharmaceutical houses. Miss Sian had to run the papers.

"I was frightened, very frightened," she said, "but I didn't have much choice."

She was 23. She was caught in a riptide of resentment from some of the employees who



Sally Aw Sian—Always Ahead of the Type

couldn't see a young woman as the big boss.

"But that's an ingrained attitude," Miss Sian explained. "You have to be patient. You can't change that overnight."

In the 16 years that she's been a publisher, she's earned their respect by increasing the circulation of the Chinese papers by almost 30%, tripling her classified ads and scoring consistent gains in display advertising. She was the first one to use offset presses in Hong Kong and made all her competitors follow suit. She makes at least three trips a year to America, examining new publishing methods, from special inks to computers. She's always ahead of the type.

Five years ago she conceived the idea of an American edition of her Chinese papers, started the first in San Francisco and when it went well, began the second in New York. In both editions she shrewdly added short fiction, entertainment news and stock market quotations.

"We are now the second largest Chinese papers on the West and East Coasts," Miss Sian said. Her New York circulation is 6,000; San Francisco, 5,000. The first Chinese paper is the United Journal with 10,000.

In Hong Kong, where newspapers run politically from extreme right to the extreme left and include two Communist papers, Miss Sian is fiercely independent. She scorched the Communists for inspiring the 1967 riots, which took some courage; and she criticized Chiang Kai-shek for being unrealistic and unaware of the change in the wind.

"You might think that being so close to Mao, Hong Kong is near a powder keg," Miss Sian said. "We're not. Our future is bright. We have some crime, but nothing compared to the States. We do not have the pain of youth problems or a drug culture. And we do not have the doubtful blessings of women's lib."